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THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

Miley's Rock & Roll Heart

THE BEST ALBUMS & SONGS OF 2020

HOW THE **CLIMATE CRISIS** IS CREATING A **NEW PANDEMIC ERA**

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On the Cover

Miley Cyrus, photographed in Los Angeles on November 10th, 2020, by **Brad Elterman**.

Production direction by Richie Davis. Produced by Rachael Lieberman. Wardrobe styling by Blaine Halvorson. Styling by Bradley Kenneth. Hair by Cervando Maldonado at the Wall Group. Makeup by Janice Daoud.

STYLING BY IMAN RAMADAN. DRESS AND EARRINGS BY ELOQUII.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Josiah Rundles**

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THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

MILEY'S ROCK & ROLL HEART

After two tumultuous years, Cyrus emerges with a wild new album, a fresh outlook, and a lot to say about her heroes, sobriety, and getting the respect she deserves

BY **BRITTANY SPANOS**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BRAD ELTERMAN**

THE SUN IS JUST BEGINNING TO SET IN L.A.'S SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

and Miley Cyrus is busy "tweaking on some harmonies," as she proudly puts it. She's been holed up in her home studio all afternoon with producer Andrew Watt. Her new album, *Plastic Hearts,* has long been done, but the pair still have more tricks up their sleeves, like a cover of Metallica's 1992 single "Nothing Else Matters" for an upcoming compilation. Cyrus has been belting the chorus for the past hour, in a growl that once made Waylon Jennings ask her dad, Billy Ray Cyrus, why he let a three-year-old smoke cigarettes.

"You can hear me screaming down here?" she asks, surprised her voice was loud enough to bounce off the zebra-print soundboards, down a staircase decorated in vintage *Playboys,* and into her living room. The space is homey, but there are still touches of the surreal and "rainbow shit everywhere," as she puts it, like neon psychedelic paintings and multicolored sculptures sitting next to large coffee-table books on David Bowie and Pink Floyd. Cyrus moved here, to the enclave of Hidden Hills, in September 2019, settling in next to neighbors like the Kardashians, Drake, and Jessica Simpson. At first, the ritzy, gated community seemed a bit "normcore" for her. And today, sporting a dirty-blond mullet, combat boots, and a CBGB-printed vest, she does look like she'd be more at home on the stoop of Trash & Vaudeville in New York's East Village with the rest of the punk kids.

In the past few months, many listeners have heard Cyrus' voice as if for the first time. In August, she dropped "Midnight Sky," a cosmic, Stevie Nicks-sampling Eighties-pop burner, then spent the next several months proving she can sing the hell out of almost anything. Her live-streamed covers of songs like Blondie's "Heart of Glass" and the Cranberries' "Zombie" have gone viral, and by the time she announced *Plastic Hearts,* listeners were all but begging her to release a rock album. She was way ahead of them: *Plastic Hearts* is a raucous tribute to the synths, power ballads, and general debauchery of the Eighties, with help from guests like Joan Jett, Stevie Nicks, Dua Lipa, Billy Idol, Mark Ronson, Red Hot Chili Peppers' Chad Smith, and Foo Fighters' Taylor Hawkins. It's an exciting move, but not out of nowhere. "One of my first concerts ever was Poison and Warrant," Cyrus says, noting she almost broke her leg when she climbed onto a folding chair so she could see. She ended up covering Poison's hit ballad "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" on 2010's *Can't Be Tamed,* the first album she released as an adult singer ditching her teen-pop past.

When we meet, Cyrus is a few weeks shy of her 28th birthday, which is a little hard to believe given how long she's been famous. She was beamed into the homes of millions of kids as the teenage star of Disney's *Hannah Montana,* then spent her post-Disney years shredding any remnant of her America's Sweetheart image by singing about molly, swinging half-naked on a wrecking ball, and crafting a psychedelic-pop opus with the Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne.

The irony of *Plastic Hearts* paying tribute to some of rock's wildest years is that Cyrus herself is the most centered she's ever been. "Someone said to me the other day, 'I think of you as a free bird that can't be held down,' " she says. "I don't really feel that way. I feel very weighted and grounded. I'm free, but I feel responsibility. I take my mental and physical health a lot more seriously than I ever did before."

To get to that place, though, she had to spend two years being put through the wringer. In late 2018, the Malibu home she shared with then-fiancé Liam Hemsworth burned down due to the Woolsey Fire. The pair, who had been engaged for six years, got hitched a month later, but then filed for divorce just eight months after that. Cyrus followed the breakup with a pair of tabloid-hounded relationships, with *The Hills*' Kaitlynn Carter and longtime friend Cody Simpson.

Then, in November 2019, she faced another cosmic curveball: emergency surgery for Reinke's edema, often caused by overuse of the vocal cords. The surgery was successful, but the experience – along with a healthy fear of joining the 27 Club – persuaded her to give up drinking and drugs.

"My voice is where I hold most of my value, to myself and other people," she says, stretched out on the U-shaped couch in her studio, drinking a nonalcoholic Heineken "just for the vibe." For the first time in her career, Cyrus feels like the voice she so values and the words she's saying are finally being taken seriously. She cites Jett, Dolly Parton, and Debbie Harry as the blueprints for *Plastic Hearts*: making honest records without sacrificing any of the glamour she adores. "I'm introducing my audience, my generation, to everything that inspired me and created this cocktail of chaos that I am."

You've always seemed to have a taste for rock, from covering Nirvana as a teen to singing "Say Hello 2 Heaven" at a Chris Cornell tribute in 2019. It feels like you've been waiting to make this album for years. Why now?

I could say I fucking planned it and I'm a strategic fucking genius, but I wish I was this strategic. I don't ever know what kind of record I'm trying to make when I start making it. And then because of how my lifestyle [is] and where I am in my life, it always fits and works because it's just honest. I fucking grew up listening to country music; we're storytellers. Every record is storytelling.

It seems like you've never gotten as much respect as you have now. Does that mean anything to you?

I think that I'm really embracing – and everyone else is embracing, too – that the music is a priority right now. [*Points to giant photo of her licking an ice cream cone shot in 2013.*] Look at this fucking wall. That wasn't about the music for a moment. The music was driving it, but all those things from that era, especially with *Bangerz,* the pop-culture moments almost eclipse the music itself. I guess I'm just in love with the fact that for once it feels like it's really focused on the music, and I think I felt that I almost took some blame for the distraction sometimes.

I remember comments saying, "Why the fuck do you distract everybody with getting naked and shaking your ass when you're a fucking talented-ass singer?" But because I did grow up watching the *Cher* show religiously, I love show business. I love entertainment. I love pop culture. I love unforgettable moments. I think there was a balance of me just loving making big media moments but also a sadness in the fact that I would think, "Did anyone even hear my song?" When you think of [2013's] "Wrecking Ball," you don't think of the pain. You don't think of me looking directly into the camera, breaking the wall, crying, reaching out. You remember me getting naked, and I don't know whose fault that is. I don't know if that's mine or the way that our brains are programmed to think sexuality, for lack of a better word, trumps art.

We're reclaiming that word, "trumps."

It's actually a perfect word for it, especially for that. I do believe there's power in sexuality.

Senior writer BRITTANY SPANOS *wrote the Normani cover story in March.*

PRODUCTION DIRECTION BY RICHIE DAVIS. PRODUCED BY RACHAEL LIEBERMAN. WARDROBE STYLING BY BLAINE HALVORSON. STYLING BY BRADLEY KENNETH. HAIR BY CERVANDO MALDONADO AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY JANICE DAOUD. OPPOSITE PAGE: BOOTS BY HARRIS REED

When you think of "formulaic pop stars," you think of pop stars naked in a bodysuit. And that's not really what pop culture is. That's not what pop is. Pop stars . . . it's like superheroes.

I really love Dolly [Parton] for her character, for what Dolly as a character represents, and that the music is true. Same thing with Bowie. David Bowie coming out in a teal suit and stack shoes, that's intriguing to us, and he's beautiful and he's alien. He's not pedestrian. That is what creates the fantasy, which creates escapism. When used responsibly, it's an incredible gift you can give to the audience. Especially in years like this one.

Those potential "distractions" can be what makes a song legendary. You still have enduring hits from your Disney days.

Which is why I love having idols like Joan [Jett]. When I think of the Runaways, they were a teen band. It was rebellious because no girls were doing what they were doing at the time, but they were a teen girl group. If we could only give the credit to ourselves that we give to other people . . . My therapist always goes, "Would your sister say that to you?" The things I say to myself, would I say this shit to other people that I love? No.

I discredited myself for what I had been almost every step of the way. During *Dead Petz,* discrediting *Bangerz*. During *Bangerz,* discrediting *Hannah Montana*. During "Malibu," discrediting *Bangerz*. It's almost like when I have evolved, I've then become shameful of who I was before. What makes you an adult, I think, is being OK with who you've been before.

Was the album finished before "Midnight Sky" came out?

It was. We had pretty much every song besides "Midnight Sky." I was going to have "Angels Like You" be my first single, and then I'm like, "Let's just go in the studio. Let's just write one more thing." Having Stevie [Nicks] bless "Midnight Sky" made me know it was the right one, because it's almost like she validated this whole era. It's beyond an era.

I guess me stepping into that, it's pretty pivotal. . . . Actually, one of the reasons I got sober was I had just turned 26, and I said, "I got to pull my shit together before I'm 27, because 27 is the time you cross over that threshold into living or dying a legend." I didn't want to not make it through being 27. I didn't want to join that club. Probably about halfway into 26, I got sober. Then by 27, [November 2019] I was pretty much fully sober. Then, like a lot of people during the pandemic, I fell off. It was really a struggle. Mental health and anxiety and all that. I lost myself there, and now I'm back on five weeks.

By fell off, you mean drinking?

Drinking. Haven't done drugs in years. Honestly, I never try to, again, be a fortune-teller. I try to not be naive. Things fucking happen. But from sitting here with you right now, I would say it would have to be a cold day in hell for me to relapse on drugs.

I would possibly take mushrooms. I did take ayahuasca, and I really, really liked that, but I don't think I would do it again.

It seems very intense.

Very intense. Have you done it?

I have not.

Ayahuasca was definitely one of my favorite drugs I've ever done. When I did it, I asked everyone else in the room, "Did your entire life just change? Are you a new person?" They all looked at me and said, "No." And they're like, "You're so extreme. Of course you have to have the most extreme trip off all." Actually, the shaman said people take ayahuasca three, four times, sometimes 30 times before they have the kind of trip I had.

I saw the snakes right away, and the snakes come and grab you and take you to the Mama Aya, and she walks you through your whole trip, and it was pretty crazy. I loved it, though.

The lyric on "Angels Like You" that really struck me is "I'm everything they said I would be." You've been a public figure for half your life and perceived a million different ways. How do you think you're looked at today?

Today is very different. I think since "Midnight Sky" a lot has changed. I think I've always had a level of respect, but the c-word, "crazy," was labeled on me a lot. It was that I was crazy, that I was, even at some points, cold or unable to settle down. And that's what "Angels Like You" was about. I'm the stereotype. I'm what you thought I'd be, I'm everything they said I would be. I had some guilt or shame with that song in the way that it's written, but now that I listen to it, it is actually apologetic. It is saying, "It's not your fault I ruin everything, and it's not your fault that I can't be what you need." My independence and, I guess, my survivalist instincts make it where I can seem selfish.

It's funny that people accused you of being unable to settle down. I can't think of anything more stabilizing than marrying someone you started dating when you were 17.

Exactly. In the past two years, I think, we've made some big progress, especially toward women and bodies. I don't even know if you really can slut-shame now. Is that even a thing? The media hasn't really slut-shamed me in a long time. At one point I was like, "Yo, when I'm 16 and you're circling my boobs and shit like that . . . I'm the bad guy?" I think people are starting to go, "Wait, wait, wait. That was fucked up." They're starting to know who the enemy and who the victim was there.

Do you feel like there has been a long-term effect on you from the intense scrutiny on your sexuality and body from such a young age?

I can't remember if it hurt my feelings or not. I don't remember it really penetrating. I think I knew who I was meant to be, but I'm sure there's something in there. Some trauma of feeling so criticized, I think, for what I felt was pretty average teenage, early [twenties] exploration.

How did your parents handle it when you had private photos leaked, or when some claimed you were dancing on a stripper pole at the Kids' Choice Awards?

BEAT ME
BITE ME
WHIP ME
FUCK ME
CUM ALL OVER MY TITS
ME

My dad ignored it because it's just like any teenage girl and their dad's like, "Let's please not have this conversation." My mom, I think it made her really angry. I think even she felt it could be distracting from what I was doing. She knew the voice and talents that I could showcase. She was like, "What the fuck? You have the biggest song. Can you just make it about the song? Why do you have to make it about being a stripper?"

Do you remember the first song you ever wrote?

"Pink Isn't a Color, It's an Attitude." "It's the sparkle in the shine. It's the green and the grass to kick in the ass." That was my first song. That's an Avril Lavigne song. I've been doing pop rock. I wrote a song called "Evil Mother in the Dead of the Night." It was about my mom trying to buy happiness at the mall because my mom would always take me to the mall for hours on end, and I would pretend to be a mannequin. I'd get a crowd gathered around me because I would pose for so long. It was about her being shallow. When I went home, I got my journal out and sang it to her, and she's like, "You little bitch."

How old were you?

I probably started writing songs when I was 10 years old. It's probably some sort of publishing problem. I would have been sued if this was a real song, because I bought something at the fair that said, "Pink isn't a color, it's an attitude." And I was like, that's genius. I started a band called Blue Roses, and our first song was "Pink Isn't a Color," so we had the blue and pink. That was my first band. It was a girl rock band.

Were you still writing a lot when *Hannah Montana* started up?

I was always writing. I wrote the *Meet Miley Cyrus* record with my collaborator from "7 Things." That is as honest as anything I write today, "7 Things." I came in, and I think I said, "These are the seven things I hate the most about this dude that broke my heart." And he was like, "Well, let's just write '7 Things' then." "Fly on the Wall" was really about the media at that time. They were already starting to label me as "America's Sweetheart Gone Wrong." I was thinking, "If you could only be a fly on the wall. It's worse than you can imagine." Or better, I guess.

It must have been difficult to come into your own as a pop star outside of the show.

I had to evolve because Hannah was larger than life, larger than me. I felt like I was never going to amount to the success of Hannah Montana. That's how Lil Nas X actually knew of my dad. He grew up watching Hannah Montana and said, "I want to do a song with Robby Ray." That's literally what happened. Being a young queer kid's idol that could turn out to be a Lil Nas X and create a whole identity for themselves off being inspired from watching me growing up. Or I hear artists like Troye Sivan say he felt more comfortable with his sexuality when I came out with "My Heart Beats for Love."

When my peers are having these experiences and accepting themselves because of something that I demonstrated while they were a kid, that's when I go, "Shit, I fucking am Hannah Montana." Really, Hannah Montana was not a character. That wasn't what the show is about. It was about a normal girl with a fucking wig on. Everything was always in me. The concept of the show, it's me. I've had to really come to terms with that and not be third-person about it.

Do you have a similar fear now when it comes to Miley Cyrus, pop star? Do you worry that your past eclipses your present?

I feel like I've outgrown that fear. I'm so settled in what I'm doing and who I am. All I've ever wanted is respect as an artist and to have pride in what I make. I think that comes with the dedication and diligence that I really put in the effort. I put in the work.

You get to a point where numbers and headlines don't do the same chemical reaction to your brain they do in the beginning. There's actually a release of dopamine that gets dumped into your skull when people are raving about you or when you walk by a magazine stand and you're on every cover. Finding the balance I have now has made it much easier for me. It completely ate up that fear and spit it out.

You haven't been on a big arena tour since *Bangerz*. Was there a conscious reason to stay away from that?

I think it's the expectation. It's so many seats to fill, and that means so many people have to like you.

After *Younger Now* came out in 2017, you decided not to tour and instead stayed at home with your pigs, as you said back then, and Liam. What was that like?

In early 2018, I was playing house, which felt really good at the time. Now I have this healthy perspective that I didn't have before. I learned a lot about what I can and cannot be for someone else and what I can and cannot accept for myself.

A couple of years ago, it looked like I was living some fairy tale. It really wasn't. At that time, my experimentation with drugs and booze and the circle of people around me was not fulfilling or sustainable or ever going to get me to my fullest potential and purpose.

The experimentation with drugs and booze was happening simultaneously with playing house?

At the same time. There's an idea that during the *Younger Now* era, I was pure. The media likes to have my hair or what I look like be the point of reference for my sanity. "Hair's long and blond, she's sane right now. She cannot be fucked up on drugs. It's when her hair is painted or she's growing out her armpit hair [that] she's on drugs."

That's also a very stereotypical view of femininity and women.

A hundred percent. "She's got a man. She's living in a house playing wife." Dude, I was way more off my path at that time than any of the times before where my sanity was being questioned. I don't like ever saying anything in a very solid concrete way, but right now I have been focusing on sobriety as I wanted to wake up 100 percent, 100 percent of the time. If I've ever learned to balance myself and to not take it too far, I would. But so far any time I've messed with that, it hasn't gotten me what I want.

I don't believe [in] the manifestation of sitting on a pillow in the morning, with the pointer finger and the thumb touching and my eyes closed and hoping. I grind until it's real. That time in my life just wasn't for me. In every way.

Was sobriety more of a choice or more of a necessity?

Sobriety was a choice. It depends how you look at it. I think it's necessary for me to fulfill my purpose right now. I try to bookend everything for right now, because otherwise it becomes a statement [and] that pressure of maintaining. I guess that's what "Midnight Sky" says, "Forever and ever no more." No more concrete statements.

Did you reassess what fun looked like for you?

I'm really good at quitting things. I have a weed machine right there. I've never smoked out of it, and it's full. [If] I had a cocaine machine, it might not be full. That's the thing. I'm really not an addict. You can have that. You're good. To me, fun is any time I feel like I really display or I really reach my full potential. When the glass ceiling breaks. That's fucking fun for me.

I can't imagine what losing a house in a wildfire felt like. How did that affect you at the end of 2018?

In a way, it did what I couldn't do for myself. It removed me from what no longer was serving its purpose. And then as you drown, you reach for that lifesaver and you want to save yourself. I think that's really what, ultimately, getting married was for me. One last attempt to save myself.

The last solo song you released before your vocal-cord surgery was "Slide Away," which felt like a raw statement on the end of your marriage. When did you write that song?

I was still in my relationship, I was still living in my house in Malibu. That's why [*Cont. on 78*]

"I LOVED MAKING BIG MEDIA MOMENTS BUT THERE WAS ALSO A SADNESS: 'DID ANYONE EVEN HEAR MY SONG?'"

Gab
1
PRESS AND HOLD "DOOR CLOSE" BUTTON
TO OPEN DOOR...
PRESS AND HOLD "DOOR OPEN" BUTTON
TO HOLD CAR AT FLOOR...
WITH DOORS OPEN, TURN KEY TO "HOLD"
TO RETURN CAR TO RECALL FLOOR...
WITH DOORS OPEN, TURN KEY TO "OFF"
7
4
3
2
1
G

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Exp._____ CVV:____ Sign: _____
to: Name_____
Address_____
City/State_____zip_____
Tel:_____ email_____
(*PA add 6% tax, Canada add US $13 per vial) RS

MOVIES

[*Cont. from 77*] part of smaller distributors to get their films seen (something not really promised by theatrical distribution), 2020 quietly turned into one of the most idiosyncratic and surprising movie seasons in ages. The temptation to historicize this moment in terms of what didn't get released, i.e., the movies that bigger studios and media advertisers care the most about, would be a grave error.

Because small, politically challenging fare proved especially urgent, pungent, and effective in 2020. This was not only the year of the pandemic, but also a year in which protests against racial injustice took center stage in the media, to say nothing of on the streets, and latent class inequities leaped to the forefront. Oh – and it was an election year. The once-unnervingly-popular speculation that the Trump Era would give rise to great art is as naive today as it was four years ago. And when anyone forgoing mere Trump impersonations to get adventurous got a little too close to the electric fence, the result seemed to be either: a) Everyone collectively losing their shit, b) filmmakers completely blowing it, or c) both. (See *The Hunt,* the gory satire about coastal elites hunting red-staters for sport that showed up culturally DOA.)

It's thanks to Covid-19 that digital platforms – streamers and virtual cinemas alike – are almost the only movie experience any of us had this year. That isn't to say there was no such thing as digital "hits" akin to theatrical ones, and I begrudge no one the time spent watching *Hubie Halloween,* a movie that makes me laugh a lot, or the hyper-relevant high-wire act of *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm,* a movie that made me laugh even more.

More important, this year made it easier to cheerlead for movies like Eliza Hittman's extraordinary *Never Rarely Sometimes Always,* about a teenager's effort to get a safe abortion, or Kitty Green's low key and exacting *The Assistant,* which tackles the sins of Harvey Weinstein by rendering the disgraced mogul solely in terms of invisible power. It became easier to point people to movies that are already streaming on Amazon Prime or Netflix – things like Garrett Bradley's documentary *Time,* an innovating, lyrical study of a woman's effort to get her husband released from prison. Or, on the other side of the divide, David Fincher's peculiarly political, *Citizen Kane* inspired *Mank,* which, even with Fincher's name attached, is hard to imagine having been a hit.

Sure, it's a silver lining to a dark cloud hovering over Tornado Alley. The pandemic rages on; art matters, but it certainly won't survive if people don't. There were also, it must be said, plenty of bad movies this year, too, and if anything, a striving for political relevance is exactly what exposes movies like Jon Stewart's small-town satire *Irresistible* or the specious wigfest that is Aaron Sorkin's *Trial of the Chicago 7* – for the simplistic liberal grist that they are. That can't be helped; unlike the coronavirus, you could see them coming. But that's not what we'll remember when we look back on this *annus miserabilis.* What will spring to mind when we think of 2020 at the movies will be how the best and brightest of these works empowered us to look elsewhere for epiphanies. The movies didn't die. They were just a literal click away. ®

MILEY CYRUS

[*Cont. from 50*] [I sang], "I want my house in the hills." I wanted out of there, and it says, "I don't want the whiskey and pills." I didn't want to maintain that lifestyle. It's really weird because I can never figure out what comes first: art or life? Does art imitate life or life imitate art? Or do you speak it into existence? Am I that powerful that when I write something, I become it?

I think of making music sometimes as a sacrifice because you end up writing songs that can hurt people, that can hurt one person but make you feel less alone. It's like, is it worth it? Is it worth writing music that's so honest? Dolly said there's two sides to every story. When you're telling your side of the story, is it fair? You don't make songs to hurt somebody, but they do. Songs like "Angels Like You," it's not easy for someone to listen to when they know it's about them. "You're going to wish we never met on the day I leave." Music can be a sacrifice.

On "Hate Me," you contemplate what will happen if you die. Are you thinking of your own mortality often?

I think everyone's mortality lingers in some way. I think thinking about life and thinking about death is a part of gratitude. Being afraid of inevitable things is just wasting time. I've tried to think a lot about each second of my life and making it really count. That's what has really been sort of a cure for me, whether it's with anxiety, jealousy, resentment, bitterness.

That had a lot to do with me and my back-and-forth with sobriety. It's like, I want to get fucked up and live life to the fullest. But is it really living life to the fullest if you can't remember [anything]? "Live fast, die young" isn't really the goal. I want to push myself. I want to see if I can become less solid and trapped in this physical form of ourselves, and how we can expand, which I think is what music does.

I actually feel that, on a physical level, on days like today, when "Prisoner" is being released, knowing the birth of this album is about to happen. I can actually feel myself, not my physical self, but in this soul form, getting pulled in all these different directions. It can be pretty tough to bring yourself back to a weighted, heavy existence that's anchored and settled, because it's very unsettling being pulled by all these other consciousnesses all over the place.

What do you want your legacy to be?

I want to lay down a new stone for a path for the next generation of artists, philanthropists, the way that Debbie Harry has done for me. I'd like to be known as someone that created something that didn't quite exist, or that I delivered something that no one knew that they needed or wanted, but when they had it felt that they couldn't live without it. That's what I would want as an artist.

But I have no idea how the fuck I'd want to be remembered. I'm a pretty wicked daughter. I think I'm fucking very dedicated to my family. I feel like I've fought for what I really wanted, whether that's fighting for rights, or against injustices, working with Happy Hippie Foundation. I'd want that to be a priority. I'd want to have been a trailblazer, but I think it's really hard talking about it because I'm still so here with so much left to do. I couldn't really tell you how I'd want to be remembered because all the things that I'd hopefully be remembered for haven't happened yet. ®

THE YEAR IN MUSIC

In one of the worst years in history, music guided us through it — from Taylor Swift's cathartic intimacy to Dua Lipa's disco escapism and Bad Bunny's revolutionary reggaeton

ALBUMS OF THE YEAR

Taylor Swift

FOLKLORE

HOW DID TAYLOR SWIFT spend her quarantine? Completely reinventing her sound with this quietly audacious masterpiece. *Folklore* is Swift stripping her music down to its acoustic essence, reveling in goth-folk beauty and painterly narrative possibility. Without the pressure of having to write radio hits, Swift dug deep and shed the über-pop trappings of her previous album, 2019's *Lover,* for a project that put her once-in-a-generation songwriting talent front and center like never before, with assists from collaborators like Jack Antonoff, Aaron Dessner of the National, and Bon Iver's Justin Vernon. Her scope could be as grand as the ruling-class dissection "The Last Great American Dynasty" or as gruelingly intimate as the last-ditch emotional unburdening of "This Is Me Trying." At the heart of *Folklore* are songs like "August" and "Betty," instant classics that render the bedrock Swiftian theme of elegiac romantic intrigue with new levels of detail, urgency, and empathy. The result was music that provided catharsis and solace just when we needed it.

BETH GARRABRANT

2

FIONA APPLE

FETCH THE BOLT CUTTERS

FIONA APPLE has spent her career defying expectations. But few were prepared for the audacity of her first album in nearly a decade. *Bolt Cutters* is as uncompromising and unpredictable as Apple's previous run of craftily chaotic alt-pop operettas, whether she's punctuating her vocals with barks and meows on the title track or mustering orchestras of drums to drive home her stories of vengeful epiphany and underdog resilience. But along with her usual incisive individuality there's a commitment to the sisterly community in songs like "Ladies" and "Shameika," making this not just her most intense record, but her most affirming one, too.

Bad Bunny YHLQMDLG

3

THE PUERTO RICAN hitmaker could have stocked his second solo LP with bankable pop cameos. Instead, he made the world party on his terms with *Yo Hago Lo Que Me Da La Gana* (a.k.a. *I Do Whatever I Want*). Bad Bunny doubled down on his eclectic reggaeton vision – from the chaotic club jam "Safaera" to the bossa nova trap of "Si Veo a Tu Mamá" to the heavy metal of "Hablamos Mañana." He threatened to retire on the album-closing "<3," but for an artist so on his game, slowing down doesn't seem like an option.

4

Bob Dylan

ROUGH AND ROWDY WAYS

BOB DYLAN'S first album of new songs in eight years is a lyrical tour de force teeming with outrageous jokes ("My Own Version of You"), playful boasts ("I Contain Multitudes"), and irreverent tributes to the greats ("Goodbye Jimmy Reed"). Underneath it all, there's a sense of melancholy that peaks on the sublime end-of-the-road ballad "Key West." These songs add up to Dylan's funniest, most surprising, and richest album since *Love and Theft*.

5

DUA LIPA

FUTURE NOSTALGIA

DUA LIPA'S second album would have been a magnificent disco trip even in the best of all possible years. But *Future Nostalgia* was crucial for a time when these beats were as close to the club as fans could possibly get. It's a rush of uptempo dance glitz, with Lipa twirling the night away in the stilettos of queens like Madonna ("Hallucinate") or Gloria Gaynor ("Don't Start Now") or Olivia Newton-John ("Physical"). "Baby, keep on dancing like you ain't got a choice," she commands in "Physical," and as long as *Future Nostalgia* keeps playing, shutting down is the worst idea imaginable.

FROM TOP: TODD WILLIAMSON/NBC/NBCU PHOTO BANK/GETTY IMAGES; HUGO COMTE; COURTESY OF FIONA APPLE

6

RUN THE JEWELS

RTJ4

RELEASED at the height of the protests that engulfed America after the killing of George Floyd, the explosive fourth LP from lefty rap duo Run the Jewels felt like the soundtrack to a revolution. Killer Mike and El-P updated the old-school hip-hop radicalism of Public Enemy and N.W.A for a new generation, with a frenetic sonic assault and lyrics that took on racist cops, corporate greed, narcotizing social media, and other evils with as much humor as rage, and with even a little hope that together we might battle our way to a better future.

Killer Mike and El-P

7

Waxahatchee SAINT CLOUD

THE FIFTH album from singer-songwriter Katie Crutchfield is a roots-rock gut punch, steeped in her own Alabama upbringing and the influence of icons such as Lucinda Williams and Emmylou Harris. Whether she is likening love to honey on a spoon, reflecting on picked flowers in a soda bottle, or singing about getting sober, Crutchfield's finest work yet is the kind of country comfort that feels at once immediate and timeless.

8

LIL UZI VERT

ETERNAL ATAKE

AFTER SPENDING the past couple of years in record-label purgatory, the gifted Philly rapper returned with this beast of a comeback, based around a loose alien-abduction theme and spilling his spaced-out vision over three dazzling sides. *Eternal Atake* is shattering one moment and slippery the next – an LP where a riff on the Backstreet Boys' "I Want It That Way" coexists with a jittery track built around the music from Microsoft Windows' video game *Space Cadet 3D Pinball*. Throughout it all, Lil Uzi Vert's steamrolling force never lets up: "Lo Mein" has all the frills of a battering ram, and even his ballads hit like a brick through your window.

9

Jessie Ware WHAT'S YOUR PLEASURE?

THE BEST ALBUM yet from this British pop star split the difference between dance-floor elation and that moment when the music ends and lust turns to longing. The ambient street sounds that open "Ooh La La" set the tone for a record that evokes a night out rushing from club to club, while songs like "Soul Control" and "Save a Kiss" bring to mind peak Donna Summer. But what truly sets the album apart is its universal sense of romantic hunger. On *What's Your Pleasure?*, we're all permitted beyond the velvet rope.

FROM TOP: ERICA HERNANDEZ; ATLANTIC RECORDS; TIMOTHY SACCENTI; CARLIJN JACOBS

10 PHOEBE BRIDGERS

PUNISHER

ANTICIPATION was high for Bridgers' second LP, and she more than delivered. Every track sparks with sharp writing and emotional impact – from folk stunners like "Graceland Too" to the tornadic indie rock of "I Know the End."

11 LADY GAGA

CHROMATICA

GAGA'S SIXTH LP was a reverent love letter to her favorite club sounds (from deep house to trance and Italo disco), full of resilient euphoria. When songs like "1000 Doves" or "Sine From Above" come on, it's a joy to hear her reclaiming her home turf.

12 BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

LETTER TO YOU

RECORDED IN a five-day whirlwind with the E Street Band, this was Springsteen riffling through his past and, on the steely rocker "Ghosts," staring down the autumn of his years. It made for one of his most urgent and personal LPs in recent memory.

13 CITY GIRLS

CITY ON LOCK

PERHAPS this year's most uproarious breakout LP – the sound of two gold-star trash-talkers getting theirs over some window-rattling South Florida funk: "Enough is enough, bitch/City Girls with the fuck shit," and that fuck shit is rarely so radiant.

14 Haim

WOMEN IN MUSIC PT. III

HAIM'S TRADEMARK perfectly turned throwbacks to Fleetwood Mac and Nineties R&B are nothing new, but on the band's third album the pop homage is weirder and more daring than ever before. What really takes center stage here is a newfound emotional and artistic maturity, with songs that tackle the complexities of depression ("I Know Alone"), codependency ("FUBT"), and sisterly friendship ("Hallelujah").

15 FLO MILLI

HO, WHY IS YOU HERE?

FLO MILLI'S first full-length mixtape is almost Ramones-ian in its brash efficiency – 12 songs, 30 minutes, zero filler. The 20-year-old Alabama rapper's rise was aided by TikTok, but she's mastered the needling taunts of classic East Coast hip-hop as she shreds boys who text too much and haters of all kinds. Whether she's comparing herself to an Obama daughter or rocking an SWV sample from before she was born, it adds up to a uniquely fun record in a year sorely lacking in good times.

16 BTS

MAP OF THE SOUL: 7

THE K-POP kings didn't water down their style (or language) to conquer America. *Map* is their most complex and personal album yet, pursuing their loftiest creative ambitions with heartfelt confessionals like Suge's rap-star space fantasy "Interlude: Shadow."

17 Fleet Foxes

SHORE

ROBIN PECKNOLD gave us the sweetest version yet of his band's artful soft-rock pastoralism. The most moving moments on *Shore* pay tribute to departed musical heroes, from Otis Redding to Nick Drake, and at its best, this lives up to their image.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: YANA YATSUK; ERIC HART JR.; DANNY CLINCH

18

Moses Sumney

GRÆ

THIS DOUBLE-LP opus from North Carolina singer-songwriter Sumney floated between rootsy plainspokenness and futurist pop, minimalist experiments and maximalist reach. Most important, he filled the record with captivating songs, from the tender "Polly" to the naked torch song "Me in 20 Years."

19

Chloe x Halle

UNGODLY HOUR

A FLAWLESS R&B gem from Atlanta twins Chloe and Halle Bailey. *Ungodly Hour* is way past the teen vibe of their debut, *The Kids Are Alright,* showing off their sophisticated writing, producing, and singing. They team up with the U.K. house duo Disclosure for the kaleidoscopic title ballad, and testify to their twenty-something grit with world-beating confidence.

20

Ashley McBryde

NEVER WILL

BUILDING ON the back-to-basics success of her 2018 major-label debut, *Never Will* was this year's most adventurous mainstream country LP. McBryde's inspiration spans from old-timey mountain music ("Velvet Red") to the glimmering, Fleetwood Mac-indebted title track, and she firmly establishes herself as an ace chronicler of forbidden pleasure and hardboiled lust.

21

BEACH BUNNY

HONEYMOON

EMO ANGST feels thrillingly brand-new on this Chicago band's debut, driven by the bracingly real songwriting of singer-guitarist Lili Trifilio. Pop-punk torpedoes like "Promises" and "Colorblind" power through self-doubt in a way that's both archetypal and totally original, and when Trifilio gets what she wants on "Cloud 9," you want to jump up and high-five her.

22

Ariana Grande

POSITIONS

REMEMBER when Grande appeared in her "God Is a Woman" video as a benevolent deity, sexually fingering the Earth? *Positions* is the album this goddess made when she looked down and saw the planet was in even more pitiful shape. It's Grande's R&B concept album about having rampant round-the-clock sex, to the point where it makes her other records sound tame.

23

MILEY CYRUS

PLASTIC HEARTS

CYRUS HAS never had more fun or sounded more herself than here, mashing up hits from the Seventies and Eighties into her vision of karaoke catharsis, channeling gods like Stevie Nicks and Dolly Parton on an album where the road of excess finally does lead to the palace of wisdom.

24

SELENA GOMEZ

RARE

IT'S BEEN five years since Gomez dropped *Revival,* one of the past decade's sharpest breakup albums. On *Rare,* she goes even harder, with a more acerbic adult perspective, raging about wasted hours babysitting emotional parasites. Even in playful kiss-offs like "Cut You Off" or "Rare," it's cathartic to hear her dump out the bad years like they're just burned toast.

25

HALSEY

MANIC

HALSEY has no inhibitions when it comes to getting raw emotionally – and *Manic* is her most fearless move yet. She chases her darkest anxieties all over the spectrum, from hip-hop to rock to country. Halsey has the too-much, too-young celebrity blues – as she sings, "I remember the names of every single kid I've met/But I forget half the people I've gotten in bed." Yet she wrestles with her issues in her own unmistakably pure voice.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: ERIC GYAMFI; PARKWOOD ENTERTAINMENT; DAVE MEYERS; BRITTANY SOWACKE; JOHN SHEARER/AMA2019/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion

SONGS OF THE YEAR

From hip-hop to Latin pop to country to indie rock, the year offered hard truths for our times as well as escapist fun to keep us from totally losing it

1

Cardi B feat. Megan Thee Stallion

WAP

IN THE DARKEST depths of Covid-19 lockdown, at a moment in history when leaving your house could literally get you killed, Cardi B and Megan delivered the perfect instructions on how to beat the quarantine blues: "Gobble me, swallow me, drip down the side of me/Quick jump out 'fore you let it get inside of me." "WAP" was just the escapist raunch America needed in 2020, the sound of two of the strongest women in music defiantly putting the pleasure principle front and center in a moment when fun and joy seemed dead. Its NSFW video was brilliant since no one was at work anyway, and Cardi's Bronx fire mixed with Megan's bodacious flow makes for one of the greatest mic-passing hip-hop buddy comedies of all time. The result is a hot-girl summit for the ages.

2 Bob Dylan

KEY WEST (PHILOSOPHER PIRATE)

A brand-new classic Dylan ballad. In the nine-minute "Key West," he's adrift in Florida, murmuring the Sunshine State blues over a ghostly accordion, as he growls, "Key West is the place to be if you're looking for immortality." But even in this palm-tree paradise, he's got Desolation Row in his heart, an outlaw looking for the next chance to make his getaway.

3 Christine and the Queens

PEOPLE, I'VE BEEN SAD

WITH ITS sparse, distant synths and a voice on the verge of tears, Christine and the Queens reflected the loneliness of 2020 like no one else. When Chris switches from English lyrics to French, it not only underscores her music's sophisticated style, but also reminds us of the global nature of the pain that defines our times.

CARDI B/YOUTUBE

4 The Weeknd
BLINDING LIGHTS

R&B'S KING of pain takes a late-night ride into synth-pop darkness and comes up with a crystalline moment of sleek, lonely horndog hunger that could've easily fit between Depeche Mode and Duran Duran back in the golden age of MTV.

5 Taylor Swift
AUGUST

THE BALLAD peak of *Folklore* is one of Swift's most beautiful love-gone-wrong remembrances, a lush, diaphanous melody swirling around the elegant image of a summer love that "slipped away like a bottle of wine." It's one of those Swift classics that stays with you long after the song ends.

6 Dua Lipa
DON'T START NOW

DRIVEN BY a bass line worthy of a classic Chic tune, "Don't Start Now" updated the sound of Studio 54 for 2020, with Dua Lipa gliding past vague memories of an ex who wasn't worth her time straight to disco heaven.

7 BTS
DYNAMITE

THE BULLETPROOF Boy Scouts make a little more history: their first U.S. Number One and their first English-language hit. All seven members show off, though Jungkook takes the spotlight when he yells, "Cup of milk, let's rock and roll/King Kong, kick the drum/Rolling on like a Rolling Stone!"

8 Fiona Apple
LADIES

OVER A jagged blues swing, Apple sends an imaginary love letter to an ex's "revolving door" of new girlfriends. She's never sounded more sure of herself than when she lists off the leftover baggage – both literal and figurative – that she's left behind for her old flame's new love.

9 Harry Styles
ADORE YOU

A SLEEK sliver of psychedelic soul, on which Styles dreams up a "strawberry lipstick state of mind," and then offers you an irresistible invitation to join him there. "Adore You" was on the chart for every week of 2020. The only other hit to manage that feat: the Weeknd's "Blinding Lights."

10 The Chicks
GASLIGHTER

NATALIE MAINES turned the wreckage of her D-I-V-O-R-C-E into the launchpad for a glorious evisceration of gaslighting fools everywhere – including the one who just got booted out of the White House.

Styles

RYAN MCGINLEY

11 Miley Cyrus
MIDNIGHT SKY

THE POP provocateur basks in Eighties stadium-pop glory, channeling Stevie Nicks' "Edge of Seventeen" and making that vintage glitz her own – a debt Nicks honored when she hopped on the song's killer remix.

12 Megan Thee Stallion feat. Beyoncé
SAVAGE (REMIX)

"TALKIN' TO myself in the mirror like/'Bitch, you my boo,' " Beyoncé notes on this torch-passing remix with fellow Houstonian Megan. They turn celebrating their "classy, bougie, ratchet" greatness into an unstoppable empowerment anthem.

13 Blackpink and Selena Gomez
ICE CREAM

THE KOREAN girl-group queens make their power move on the American airwaves, with a big assist from Selena Gomez and co-writer Ariana Grande. It's a libidinal boom-box boast that jumps like a playground chant.

14 DaBaby feat. Roddy Ricch
ROCKSTAR

THE TITLE suggests a rags-to-riches flex from two of rap's hottest young stars. In fact, "Rockstar" is a poignantly moody reflection on PTSD, a theme that hit home even harder after DaBaby gave the song a BLM remix.

15 Bad Bunny feat. Jowell & Randy, and Ñengo Flow
SAFAERA

RIFFLING THROUGH decades of rap, reggae, and Latin pop, riotously switching beats and flows, this club wrecker from el Conejo Malo and three of his best buddies is like a sweaty hourlong megamix packed into five glorious minutes.

16 Lady Gaga
STUPID LOVE

AFTER YEARS of tasteful experiments, Gaga returned to her glam roots, offering up one bright candy-colored hook after another on her most thrilling heart-on-sleeve anthem in ages.

17 Phoebe Bridgers
KYOTO

2020'S BREAKOUT indie-rock singer-songwriter delivers a masterpiece of majestic indecision and bare-knuckled honesty, entering the line "I'm gonna kill you/If you don't beat me to it" into the canon of devastating rock & roll kiss-offs.

18 Perfume Genius
DESCRIBE

MIKE HADREAS is an art-pop singer-songwriter with a unique ability to glide between moods and genres as if no barriers existed at all. Here, he creates a potent anthem of desire and doubt, part soul benediction, part sludge-guitar affliction.

19 Selena Gomez
CUT YOU OFF

GOMEZ SINGS about a haircut as a metaphor for romantic dead weight. Her voice goes lower than ever, as she lays it out, all calm and collected, over a spare Seventies rock-drum thump.

20 Rina Sawayama
STFU!

RISING Japanese British star Sawayama is equally inspired by Britney Spears and Korn, and she really goes off here, telling some sucker, "Have you ever thought about taping your big mouth shut?" as the music explodes around her.

21 Mac Miller
GOOD NEWS

THIS POSTHUMOUS single drops you right inside Miller's brain, which could be a troubled place – "I wish that I could just get out my goddamn way," he pleads. But there's warmth here too – both in the sweetly chugging groove, and in Miller's delivery.

22 Caribou
YOU AND I

CARIBOU'S Dan Snaith has been making sweet electronic music for years, and this might be his most lovely moment, a New Wave-tinged meditation on loss that glistens as it broods, arriving at futurist pop with a human vulnerability.

23 Oxlade
AWAY

LAGOS, NIGERIA, has been exporting killer Afro-diasporic hits for years – tunes like the bright, butter-smooth "Away." It's a breakup song, but you wouldn't know it from the smiling generosity in Oxlade's voice.

24 Drake feat. Lil Durk
LAUGH NOW CRY LATER

LIFE MAY suck on planet Earth, but on Planet Drake it's all "Heart is still beating/My niggas still eating/Backyard, it look like the garden of Eden." With its chill brass and wily verse from Chicago drill star Lil Durk, this makes Drake's private paradise feel welcoming.

25 Hailey Whitters
JANICE AT THE HOTEL BAR

A CLASSIC Nashville story song. Whitters meets an older woman at a bar and ends up with a life's worth of homespun advice: "Stay off the pills/But get on the pill if you ain't ready to start a family." You got it, Janice!